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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [UK](#)
SUBJECT: UK ANNOUNCES IT WILL REENGAGE WITH HIZBALLAH, BUT
NOT HAMAS

REF: A. 08 LONDON 2233
[1](#)B. LONDON 252

Classified By: PolMinCouns Gregory Berry, reasons 1.4 b, d

[1](#)1. (C/NF) Summary. HMG's decision to publicly announce that it is reestablishing ties with Hizballah was based on domestic considerations, and was not meant to surprise the USG or other allies, FCO and Cabinet Office officials told us March 10. UK officials made the decision to reengage with Hizballah elected officials and intellectuals who have no affiliation with the military wing of the party in September 2008, at which time Foreign Secretary David Miliband informed then-Secretary Rice and Israeli FM Tzipi Livni, our contacts told us; nonetheless, they acknowledge that HMG should have warned the USG before the public announcement, and promised to do so before any future meetings with Hizballah members. In all its contacts with Hizballah, the UK will stress the importance of playing a constructive role in Lebanese politics and the government and abandoning violence, officials told us. They also emphasized that the UK's policy on engagement with Hamas will not change: the UK will continue to abide by the Quartet principles. End summary.

Parliamentary Action Determined Timing of Announcement

[1](#)2. (C/NF) The decision to reengage with Hizballah (the UK severed ties in 2005) was made in September 2008, and Foreign Secretary David Miliband informed then-Secretary Rice and Israeli FM Tzipi Livni at that time, FCO Head of Arab Israel Team Rob Tinline and Cabinet Office Syria/Lebanon Officer Brian Jones reminded us in separate meetings March 10. (Note: Post followed up in September 2008 with the FCO and Cabinet Office, who promised to consult with the USG before making a final decision (ref A). End note.) The process of reengagement became bogged down, Tinline said, when Hizballah insisted that any meeting with British officials receive wide press coverage. The British insisted the meetings be low-key and off-the-record, and a stand-off ensued. This stand-off is the origin of Hizballah Deputy Political Bureau Leader Mahmoud Komati's March 5 public comment that "the British have been constantly trying... to hold a dialogue with us but they wanted a secret dialogue," Tinline clarified.

[1](#)3. (C/NF) In searching for a way to break the impasse, the British Ambassador to Lebanon took advantage of the February visit of a delegation of opposition Conservative Party MPs to host a reception in their honor with the Lebanese Foreign Affairs Committee, which Hizballah MP Ali Amer attended. The MPs, who had not been aware of the change in UK policy towards engagement with Hizballah, subsequently called Rammell to testify on the record before the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) to clarify the UK position. HMG was therefore concentrating solely on the internal political dynamic with the opposition, and only realized afterward that it had failed to inform the USG and other allies, Tinline said. Jones (strictly protect) told us in confidence, however, that some within the Cabinet Office believe that Miliband confused the issue further by

discussing it on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme March 5 as if reengagement was a new decision.

Parameters for Engagement

¶4. (C/NF) In the FAC meeting, Rammell said HMG made the decision to reengage with Hizballah "in light of more positive developments in Lebanon." Tinline clarified to us that these "positive developments" include the formation of a National Unity Government, in which Hizballah is participating, as well as Hizballah's decision to stay out of Israel's Gaza offensive. The UK plans to engage only with elected officials and intellectuals who have no affiliation with the military wing of the party, which is proscribed under British law, Tinline and Jones stressed to us. In every meeting, the UK will make clear that Hizballah must play a constructive role in Lebanese politics and government, and will encourage the group to abandon violence. "This is the sole reason to talk to them," Tinline said. Tinline and Jones also pledged to give the USG advance notice of future meetings with Hizballah.

Comment: Hamas Next?

¶5. (C/NF) Rammell was careful to stress to the FAC, and Tinline and Jones to us, that the UK will continue to abide by the Quartet principles and will not engage with Hamas. Nonetheless, post is aware that Miliband is reviewing this position in light of recent realities on the ground (ref B); he has been asking his staff internally, for example, how much sense the Quartet principles make in light of the fact that Russia now talks to Hamas. We will need to keep fully engaged with HMG on this issue.

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